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"Helping Veterans Thrive:

The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism"

Pete Simi, PhD

Associate Professor of Sociology

Chapman University

Orange, CA 92866

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Chairperson Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to offer my thoughts regarding domestic extremism; a deeply troubling and vitally important issue. I am currently a professor of sociology at Chapman University and a member of the Executive Committee leadership team at the recently awarded Department of Homeland Security Office of University Programs Center of Excellence on Terrorism Prevention and Counterterrorism Research, "NCITE." As part of my research, I partner with Life After Hate, a community-based organization founded by former white supremacists dedicated to countering violent narratives and helping individuals leave the violent far-right in order to rebuild their lives. I have also served as an expert witness legal consultant on more than a dozen criminal and civil cases related to hate crimes and domestic terrorism.

In addition, I have authored or co-authored more than 60 scholarly articles and co-authored, along with Robert Futrell at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, the book manuscript, *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate* which attempts to explain how white supremacy persists across a variety of social settings.

Starting in 1996, I began monitoring extremist websites doing simple key word searches on Internet browsers and reviewing hundreds of the already thousands of these hate sites that emerged in the early days of the web. Over the past two-and-half decades, I observed the growth of far-right extremism (FRE) in digital spaces to what it is today; a virtual buffet of hate found across mainstream platforms all the way to more secretive semi-encrypted forums in the darkest regions of cyberspace[i].

In 1997, I began conducting what social scientists refer to as ethnographic fieldwork with anti-government and white supremacist extremists across the US and abroad. That fieldwork included, among other things, attending Ku Klux Klan cross burnings, neo-Nazi music shows, racist church services, and living with families to learn about their daily lives and how they came to embrace extremism. This type of research provided firsthand observation of how extremists manage to infiltrate various segments of society and blend into the mainstream.

Our research has also involved conducting intensive life history interviews with more than 100 former FREs to obtain sensitive and indepth details regarding individuals' childhood and adolescent experiences prior to their extremist involvement as well as their experiences during their involvement and the factors that led to their disengagement. This work includes extensive collaboration with Kathleen Blee at the University of Pittsburgh, Matthew DeMichele at Research Triangle International, and Steven Windisch at Temple University.

My ethnographic fieldwork started with a self-defined militia group in the southwestern United States; a group that represented the hybrid nature of FRE blending anti-government extremism, Christian Identity (a white supremacist interpretation of Christianity), the skinhead subculture, and various other elements. This group reflected longstanding overlap between white supremacist extremism and anti-government militias[ii].

One facet of our research program has involved examining various social institutions and how these can become breeding grounds for white supremacist indoctrination and radicalization. This work has focused on the US military, prison system, and law enforcement. During fieldwork, I encountered extremists who reported being currently enlisted and others who reported prior military experience. One of those individuals, Wade Page, whom I met while conducting fieldwork in Orange County, California in early 2000 had previously served in the US Army

stationed at Fort Bliss, TX and Fort Bragg, NC. Page reported to me that he became radicalized after meeting another enlisted person at Ft. Bragg who already adhered to neo-Nazi ideology. This person provided Page with neo-Nazi literature and music and when Page discharged from the military in 1998, he began a long descent into the white supremacist movement including an active role in the international neo-Nazi music scene, and, which culminated in his August 5, 2012, terror attack in Oak Creek, WI where he massacred six individuals attending a Sikh Temple.

Let me be clear from the outset - - the majority of individuals serving in the US military (including currently enlisted and veterans) have no connection to FRE. To be even more clear, serving in the military does not cause a person to become an extremist; instead, the mechanisms by which military experience may be related to extremist activity are dynamic and multi-dimensional. Research tries to identify some of those specific mechanisms related to how and why extremism and the military overlap in some cases. Studying the issues in this kind of careful manner can help prevent overly general characterizations that are neither helpful nor fair. The American people, including those who serve in the US military, deserve a careful and fair assessment of this very serious issue so that prevention and intervention strategies can be as effective as possible.

A Long History of Trouble Signs

The presence of FRE in the US military is not new, however, in the past five years, the issue has received growing attention. For example, a 2017 criminal investigation uncovered the founder of the white supremacist terror cell, the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), was actively enlisted in the Florida National Guard while plotting to target a nuclear power plant in the area. AWD promotes using violence to "accelerate" a "race war" and societal deconstruction and, along with other similar paramilitary cells, like the Base, has focused on recruiting active duty military personnel. Other investigations identified multiple AWD members who were active duty military, such as, Vasillios Pistolis, a Marine whose participation in the violent 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA included assaulting victims with flag poles and "curb stomping" individuals he believed to be "enemies" of the white supremacist movement[iii]. More recent, an active duty member of the US Army was charged with conspiring and attempting to murder US nationals, conspiring and attempting to murder military service members, providing and attempting to provide material support to terrorists, and conspiring to murder and maim in a foreign country which was related to their alleged involvement in the Satanic, neo-Nazi, Order of the Nine Angles (O9A)[iv].

Beyond recent developments, a long history documents the organizational and membership overlap between FRE and the US military. For example, the Ku Klux Klan's founding members were former confederate officers and the Klan's first Imperial Wizard was a general in the Confederate Army[v]. More recently, between 1953 and 2012, at least nine major FRE organizations were founded by active military personnel[vi]. Many of these individuals have been high-ranking officers, including generals, rear admirals, commanders, lieutenant generals, and lieutenant colonels[vii].

The most notable instance where military experience and domestic terrorism converged came during the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995. The attack claimed the lives of 168 Americans when a fertilizer bomb demolished the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City,

OK. The three individuals convicted in connection with the attack were all military veterans and, the primary culprit, Timothy McVeigh, was deeply inspired by neo-Nazi leader William Pierce's novel *the Turner Diaries*. Just over a year later, another military veteran and far right terrorist, Eric Rudolph, targeted the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, GA killing two and injuring over 100. Prior to his arrest, Rudolph executed three other bombings targeting two healthcare clinics where abortions were performed and a gay nightclub.

Based on our research, McVeigh and Rudolph's military background was not uncommon among domestic right-wing terrorists operating at that time. We found that among far-right terrorists active during the 1980s and 1990s, approximately one-third had military experience[viii]. Our findings foreshadowed the more recent research conducted by Michael Jensen and colleagues regarding the number of individuals among the January 6th (J6) insurrectionists with military experience. Their analysis is ongoing, as information continues to be uncovered, but the latest figures suggest 17% of the individuals arrested on charges related to J6 had military experience[ix]. The disproportionate number of far-right extremists with military experience reflects two different trends. First, as indicated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, far-right extremists have for decades advocated an infiltration strategy encouraging adherents to secretly immerse themselves in various social institutions including the military and law enforcement as part of a guerilla warfare strategy[x]. Second, far-right extremist organizations often intentionally target those with military experience (currently enlisted or more likely veterans) to exploit the individuals' training and to heighten their group's status[xi].

My testimony focuses on issues related to the latter issue although I would be happy to address the former issue.

A Complicated Relationship

The temporal relationship between military experience and FRE is dynamic. In some cases, there may be a substantial time period between military experience and FRE. For example, Jean Craig of the 1980's underground terror cell the Silent Brotherhood, completed her service in the Air Force in the early 1950's, however, she did not become an adherent of extremism until her aunt introduced her to white supremacist Christian Identity sermons in the early 1970's. Two decades transpired between her military experience and initial contact with FRE ideas and it took more than another decade for her to transition from FRE to involvement in overt acts of terrorism[xii]. In the case of Craig, there is little direct evidence linking her military experience to her eventual radicalization, however, this does not negate the possibility that Craig's military experience helped condition her worldview in ways she perceived as consistent with FRE. Craig's case underscores the complexity and multiplicity of factors that underlie the radicalization process.

Environmental Adversities, Trauma, & Violent Extremism

Social scientists sometimes use the terms "push factor" or "risk factor" to refer to adverse biological and environmental conditions that increase the likelihood a person will experience a variety of negative outcomes, including the onset of delinquent and/or criminal behavior. Since the 1980s, the risk factor approach has become a major perspective within criminology, as a substantial number of studies find that risk factors significantly increase the odds of short-and-long-term criminal offending[xiii].

The risk factor approach was originally developed in public health to address problems like heart disease and lung cancer[xiv]. Risk factors do not guarantee any particular outcome, but rather increase the odds that a particular outcome will occur. This is similar to various health problems. For example, cigarette smoking does not always result in lung cancer; rather, cigarette smoking is a risk factor that increases the likelihood of lung cancer. While a simple "cause and effect" relationship does not exist, studies have shown a direct correlation between adverse environmental conditions and serious developmental problems during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Moreover, research has shown a "dose response" relationship between adverse experiences and negative physical, psychological, and social outcomes (i.e., the greater the number of risk factors, the more substantial the negative consequences).

In some cases, risk factors may involve traumatic experiences. The term "trauma" refers to emotionally overwhelming events that may involve actual or threatened death, serious bodily injury, or a threat to a person's psychological integrity. Trauma may result from an "acute" event (i.e., overwhelming but short-lived events such as a single instance of violent victimization) or "chronic" events (events repeated over long periods of time, such as long-term child abuse). More precisely, trauma denotes an individual's emotional response to an event or situation and includes adverse psychological and physical consequences, such as lowered self-esteem, increased anxiety, a variety of depressive symptoms, and anger[xv]. There is a substantial subjective component in terms of defining trauma; people may experience the same negative event in different ways and have different capacities to cope with the same event.

Chronic exposure to traumatic events hinders brain development and can result in a variety of neurological anomalies, with profound functional and behavioral consequences. The consequences of trauma are substantially affected by the following: 1) a person's age during the onset of trauma (the younger a person is, the more severe the consequences); 2) the duration of any particular trauma (the longer the trauma, the more severe the consequences); and 3) the range of different types of traumas experienced (the greater the number of different types of traumas experienced, the more severe the consequences).

Previous social scientific studies demonstrate a large portion of individuals who become involved in FRE typically experience extensive histories of childhood and adolescent trauma. For example, we found 63% of our life history sample experienced four or more adverse childhood events with nearly half the sample reporting physical abuse during childhood. This finding is substantially higher than the general population and even higher than other comparable high-risk populations. We also found evidence of high levels of mental health problems with 58% of the sample reporting that they attempted or seriously considered suicide at some point during their life[xvi]. In short, our research suggests the lives of those who become violent extremists are marked by "high risk" childhood and adolescent experiences prior to their extremist involvement. The extensive and intense nature of these adverse experiences increases a person's susceptibility to impulsive, high-risk behavior and socio-political causes where an individual can become a central controlling figure helping uncover a world of perceived corruption and evil; in this sense fulfilling what Arie Kruglanski and colleagues refer to as a "quest for significance"[xvii].

Most individuals who experience trauma, however, do not become involved in violent extremism. The relationship is clearly indeterminate and not characterized by simple cause and

effect. Instead, environmental adversities increase the likelihood of various negative consequences but do not guarantee any of those negative outcomes.

Military experience, especially combat, will almost certainly involve traumatic experiences that may produce various negative consequences more generally linked to trauma. In some instances, traumatic experiences, especially complex trauma, results in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although estimated rates of PTSD among veterans vary widely, a recent meta-analysis of PTSD prevalence rates among veterans of "Operation Enduring Freedom" estimated 23% suffered from this condition[xviii]. The point is that individuals with military experience may have been exposed to certain conditions which increase vulnerabilities to various negative consequences, such as mental health problems, and, in turn, may heighten vulnerabilities related to extremist recruitment. To reiterate, however, most individuals who experience trauma and/or mental health problems do not become involved in violent extremism. While the relationship between trauma and violent extremism may be complicated, it is clear that individuals (and society) are best served when we provide intensive outreach earlier in a person's vulnerability rather than waiting until negative consequences have accumulated.

Identity Disruption, Involuntary Role Exit, and Pathways to Radicalization

This section describes two primary pathways related to exiting the military and FRE. Both pathways underscore the importance of disruptions to a person's identity. Identity disruption occurs when an individual experiences a discrepancy between a self-assessment and their perception of how others see them which are referred to as reflected appraisals. For example, a person may see themself as a "dedicated employee," but may believe their supervisor, for whatever reason, sees them as unproductive. The latter is a reflected appraisal while the former is a self-assessment and the discrepancy between the two can produce identity disruption. In severe cases, the disruption may result in an "identity crisis." Some instances of disruption involve an involuntary role exit which is a permanent termination of a person's position within a highly organized system[xix]. Involuntary role exit often occurs without advance warning, thus individuals feel unable to adequately prepare for the ensuing changes in life circumstances and self-meaning[xx]. The sudden loss of identity is particularly problematic because individuals in this situation may not consider other alternative roles to pursue and may feel substantial loss[xxi]. Involuntary role exits also produce deep emotional impact including feelings of intense shame. In response to intense shame, individuals may deflect personal responsibility and, instead, attribute the exit to external factors beyond their control[xxii]. Involuntary exits where attributions of blame are directed outward introduce substantial negative stimuli generating emotions of anger and hostility[xxiii].

Officially, the military designates involuntary exits as "dishonorable discharge," but involuntary role exits from the military may also involve "honorable discharge" in cases where the person failed to gain entry to specialized training or left the military under less than desirable circumstances that did not necessarily rise to the level of dishonorable discharge (sometimes referred to as "less than honorable discharge"). In these cases, negative discharges or unfulfilled aspirations may generate identity disruptions coupled with strong emotional reactions and elevated levels of stress. In our research, we found that 18% of individuals indicted for federal terrorism relate charges in the 1980s and 1990s with military backgrounds experienced an involuntary role exit in terms of a dishonorable or less than honorable discharge or were unable to successfully complete special forces training[xxiv].

A second pathway involves individuals who do not experience involuntary exit from the military. Instead, the person's identity disruption occurs following their return to civilian life from the military. This pathway involves a negative response that occurs when a person feels their achievements leading to a high self-assessment have been unrecognized or unappreciated. The discrepancy between the person's self-assessment and the unsatisfactory input he/she perceives receiving generates social/emotional distress such as feelings of alienation, low self-efficacy, estrangement, and a sense of identity loss[xxv]. The distress also generates negative emotions such as anger[xxvi]. Anger finds greater focus if the person begins affiliating with similarly situated individuals[xxvii] or comes in contact with someone who can help them reframe their anger.

In our study of federal indictees from the 1980s and 1990s, for example, a portion of those individuals served in the Vietnam War and experienced what they perceived as a hostile reception when they returned to the US. This unwanted reception, in turn, conflicted with their self-assessment as "war heroes" who had sacrificed for their country. In these cases, the individuals found verification among FREs who valued their service and combat experience. FRE beliefs and associations can provide the consistency a person desires. This is particularly true if the individual blames minorities or the government for their failure to achieve their desired identity.

The person may have never previously been exposed to FRE prior to experiencing an identity crisis. The transition toward FRE is facilitated, in part, due to certain congruence between FRE and the military such as hyper-masculinity, high ingroup solidarity, and an emphasis on a "warrior culture"[xxviii]. These points of similarity may make the person more comfortable with far-right indoctrination as they seek replacement for more generic needs like a sense of comradery. Overall, we found 24% of the cases fit this pattern.

Violent Extremism: Prevention & Intervention Efforts

I was also asked to address the work that Life After Hate (LAH) is doing in the prevention and intervention space related to violent extremism. I have served on the Board of Directors at LAH since 2017, and, since October 2021, have served as their volunteer Interim Executive Director while we conduct a national search for new leadership. Hence, I will restrict my comments to LAH's program of which I have substantial firsthand knowledge about but want to certainly acknowledge that there are other programs doing important work in the area of addressing violent extremism.

LAH was founded in 2011 by former violent extremists (formers) who came together knowing two things: 1) They had each gone through the complex, exhaustive work of exiting violent extremism without peer or professional support; and 2) They were committed to making sure that anyone wanting to exit would have formal intervention supports necessary to more effectively leave violent extremism behind and reintegrate into society. Four years later, ExitUSA, the US-based intervention program of LAH, was launched modeled on the examples of exit programs in Germany, Norway, and Sweden. By 2022, our group has grown to serve individuals and families across the United States, and we count among our allies some of the most respected names in the field, including academics, practitioners and other experts.

LAH does not conduct targeted outreach to current or former enlisted members of the military, but individuals who contact our organization for services may be either veterans or currently

enlisted. In those cases, like all of our clients, services would be tailored to the individual's unique constellation of needs and barriers to exiting and we promise the strictest adherence to protecting their privacy and maintaining client confidentiality.

The most basic principle that guides LAH's program is the use of an empathetic, nonjudgmental approach focused on each clients' unique needs. Individuals who seek LAH's services have typically experienced high degrees of stigmatization and isolation at various points in their lives. Empathy and nonjudgment while still holding people accountable are especially important for supporting individuals' reintegration into a pro-social life where violence is no longer promoted as a strategy to produce social change or resolve personal conflict. LAH avoids a "manualized approach" where everyone receives the exact same intervention, and, instead, offers individually-tailored interventions clearly tied to program goals which allows for the evaluation of individual level and program outcomes.

A second cornerstone to the LAH model involves the use of a multidisciplinary team that adheres to ethical and legal standards from their respective professions using empirically supported interventions, whenever possible, provided by *licensed* providers working within their scope of practice. Former extremists play important roles *in the context of the multidisciplinary team.* Their roles should be clearly defined; but can include peer-mentoring (with clear definitions of what that entails), client advocacy, developing resources (e.g., outreach, practical guides for clients, etc.), and informing program development.

The LAH approach involves a balance between program goals (i.e., disengagement, deradicalization, reintegration, and, ideally, all of the above) and the clients' wants (how does the client want their life to look outside of violent extremism, what does a purposeful, valuable, and nonviolent life look like to them).

A growing component of LAH's services involve supporting family members and friends who know someone involved in the violent far-right. The same core programmatic components are applied to those cases as well: empathy; nonjudgment; connecting them with peer mentoring and focusing on their goals and what they want to achieve in this process. For individuals swimming in uncertainty and self-doubt, whether the family and friend clients or the individual clients trying to leave violent extremism, that process may be long with lots of "ups and downs" and requires that providers, like LAH, offer patience and stability; two things that any of us who have ever struggled with adversities in life know are essential to reshaping our lives in positive, pro-social ways.

[i] Far-right-wing extremism represents a broad constellation of individuals, informal groups, and formal organizations that hold some combination of the following beliefs: ultranationalism and racism (to include xenophobic and anti-immigrant); misogyny and homophobia; and anti-government (primarily focused on anti-federal government although some elements reject all forms of government). Observers often describe three types of right-wing extremists: white supremacist extremists; anti-government/militia extremists; and single-issue extremists (e.g., anti-immigrant, anti-gay etc.). While helpful, in some respects, these buckets oversimply a reality that is far more convoluted where substantial overlap exists between each type.

[ii] See *American Militias: Rebellion, Religion, and Racism* (1996). Richard Abanes, Intervarsity Press; *A Force Upon the Plains* (1997). Kenneth Stern, University of Oklahoma Press; *Rage on the Right: The American Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to the Trump Presidency* (2019). Lane Crothers, Rowman&Littleifield.

[iii] PBS Frontline. 2017. "Documenting Hate: Charlottesville."

[iv] Dickson, EJ. 2020. "US Soldier Indicted for Plotting Attack on his own Unit with Satanic Neo-Nazi Group." *Rolling Stone*:
https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/army-soldier-ethan-melzer-order-nine-angels-o9a-indictment-1019331/.

[v]. Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, *White Power, White Pride: The White Separatist Movement in the United States* (Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[vi]. Daryl Johnson, *Right-Wing Resurgence: How a Domestic Terrorist Threat is Being Ignored* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).; Matt Kennard, *Irregular Army: How the U.S. Military Recruited Neo-Nazi's, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2012).

[vii]. Simi, Pete, Bryan Bubolz, and Ann Hardman. 2013. "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis. *Studies of Conflict & Terrorism* 36:654-71.

[viii] Ibid. Simi et al. 2013.

[ix] Jensen, Michael, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane. 2022. "Radicalization in the Ranks," START: College Park, MD (February). https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf.

[x] "White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement," Federal Bureau of Investigation, Intelligence Assessment. October 16, 2006; Simi, Pete and Robert Futrell. 2010. *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate*. Rowman&Littlefield.

[xi] See Johnson ibid.

[xii]. Kevin J. Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America's Racist Underground* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1995).

[xiii] Hautala, Sittner, and Whitbeck 2015.

[xiv] Farrington 2000 ibid.

[xv] Neller, Daniel J., Robert L. Denney, Christina A. Pietz, and R. Paul Thomlinson. 2005. "Testing the trauma model of violence." *Journal of Family Violence* 20:151-159; van der Kolk, BA. 2005. "Developmental Trauma Disorder: Toward a Rational Diagnosis for Children with Complex Trauma Histories." Psychiatric Annals 35 (5):401-8.

[xvi] See Windisch, Steve, Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee, and Matthew DeMichele. 2020. "Measuring the Extent and Nature of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) among former White Supremacists." *Terrorism and Political Violence*: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1767604; Simi, Pete, Karyn Sporer, and Bryan Bubolz. 2016. "Narratives of Childhood Adversity and Adolescent Misconduct as Precursors to Violent Extremism: A Life-Course Criminological Approach," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 53, no. 4: 536-63.

[xvii] Kruglanski, Arie, Jocelyn Belanger, and Rohan Gunaratna. 2019. *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks*. Oxford University Press.

[xviii] . Fulton, Jessica et al. 2015. "The prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Veterans: A meta-analysis." *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 31:98-107.

[xix]. Peter J. Burke, "Identity Processes and Social Stress," *American Sociological Review 56*, no. 6 (1991): 836-849.

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[xxii]. Ibid.
[xxiii]. Laurie J. Barclay, Daniel P. Skarlicki, and S. Douglas Pugh, "Exploring the Role of Emotions in Injustice Perceptions and Retaliation," *Journal of Applied Psychology 90*, no. 4 (2005): 629-643.
[xxiv] Simi et al. 2013 ibid.
[xxv]. Ibid.
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[xxvii]. Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman, "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 32* (2009): 537-559.
[xxviii]. William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill and Wang Publisher, 1994).